

'TECHNO-GRAPHY' AND 'PORNO- LOGY': AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the growth of printing press pornography and communication technologies are increasingly becoming complementary to each other. Which means technology plays a very important role in the proliferation of pornography and on the other hand pornography is one of the main driving forces behind many technological innovations. Technology especially the internet has made the production, distribution, and accessibility of porn relatively easy in comparison to the past. In other words, it has democratized pornography. But an ever-increasing presence of pornography in the society raises a moral panic which needs to be dealt with the rational and rigorous scientific backing. The big data originating from online porn plays a very important role in critically analyzing the facts and developing an appropriate political intervention. Online pornography is also diversifying the sexual content available on it for example, live sex, interactive sex is widely available in online porn. On the one hand, women objectification, sexism, violence is on the rise in online porn and on another hand, it is also giving voice to the queer and homosexuals who are not the part of mainstream sexuality so that they can enjoy their sexuality more openly. Instead of outright rejection, a balanced approach is needed to deal with this buzzword, i.e. porn.

KEYWORDS: Pornography, Technology, Sexuality, Culture & Internet

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INTRODUCTION

Pornography is one of the main driving forces behind the development of new technologies. Advancement in communication technologies and the production and distribution of sexually explicit material have been going hand in hand since the past century. This paper examines the nature of the relationship, if any between the development of communication technologies and the expansion of pornography.

Watching pornography is a private affair for most of the people and ever improving technologies create, receive or send information with least effort and high privacy (Coppersmith, 1998). Although this privacy may be more apparent than real it at least gives a sense of being in one's own private space. With the advent of the internet, the very nature of communication technologies is rapidly changing. Now it takes just a fraction of second to receive and share information with a wide population across the world. There are ongoing concerns regarding communication technologies and the proliferation of pornography. The birth of the Internet, mobile devices and of social media, have all led to concerns about accessibility and the variety of sexually explicit material (Tedeschi, 2012). Young people increasingly use the internet to access a wide range of pornographic material (Flood, 2007; Knudsen, Lofgren-Martenson, and Mansson 2007; Livingstone and Bober, 2005). Currently, pornography is a bigger business than Hollywood and is "consumed as quickly as it is produced" (Attwood, 2006, 79). The production of pornographic material includes a broad range of film, print, and online media. In 2012,

pornography revenues worldwide accounted for \$14 billion annually (Morris, 2012). This figure has more than doubled from \$8 billion spent in 1996 (Juffer, 1998).

The focus of this paper is to explore the relationship between technology and pornography rather than discussing vices and virtues of porn viewing, which have been well discussed by others elsewhere. How pornography contributes to the development of technologies and how these technologies have reshaped the nature of pornography will be pondered upon. Apart from this, the moral panic associated with the proliferation of pornography and the use of big data generated by internet in the context of pornography will also be discussed.

Pornography and Technology

The relationship between technology and pornography is more than simply the impact of the internet over it. Every new technology brings new developments in the culture. It is not that technologies have some predetermined agenda of changing the culture in a particular way. Rather it can be said that culture is an evolving entity which modifies itself with the changing realities of time and technology works as fuel to this rapid change.

Pornography has historically played a pivotal role in interactions with digital technology (Brewer et al, 2006; Coopersmith, 1999; Seigel, 2000). It plays a key role in the development of new and emerging technologies (Brewer et al, 2006). Similarly, many technologies become sexually appropriated for pornographic or sexual purposes, from the sharing of explicit photographs (Lenhart, 2009) to 'hook-ups' becoming one of the most prominent uses of geo-social networking apps (Birnholtz et al, 2015).

The desire for porn has driven the development and uptake of communication technologies (Coopersmith, 1998). Although the sole purpose of technology innovators is not to produce and propagate porn, with its increasing demand of accessing porn easily and anonymously, the audience of porn reinforces the new technology innovations and experimentations. This has, in turn, created the feedback loop that has led to the development of technology that serves the need for pornography (Sullivan & McKee, 2015). There are mainly two aspects of this feedback loop i.e. Technology determinism and the other is Social determinism.

Technology determinism argues that technology drives changes in society (Rogers, 2002). For example improvement in the technical performance of CD players led to the almost extinction of VCR from society. Technical determinism is also the framework from which to study the link between new communication technology and the global popularity of pornography (Cunningham-Engram, Guffey, & Smith, 2009). With the arrival of new photography and video technologies, the growth in the production and distribution of pornography content over the internet has become many folded in comparison to the previous decades. For a few hundred dollars, anyone can buy a digital camera and set up a website to produce, distribute and exchange pornography on a global scale (Thornburg & Lin, 2002). This phenomenon of amateur video production is one of the main reasons behind the proliferation of child pornography on the internet. Coopersmith (1998) observed that were it not for the subject matter, pornography would be praised for its ability to diffuse and help society adopt new communications technology.

While technology drives pornography, the reverse is also true. Rogers (2002) called this phenomenon social determinism, where society forces changes in technology. Pushers of pornography want the best technology so they can produce and distribute porn faster, cheaper, and easier.

The enthusiasts of pornography constitute an important demographic group because they are not only the early

adopters of new technologies, but they are even the early bird consumers, who are willing to pay extra to maintain privacy and have easier access. They are the ones who pay up the additional costs of the latest technologies, which are later provided to the larger public at subsidized or zero costs (Coppersmith, 1998, p.122-113). This trend can be seen on the World Wide Web also, or in other words, 'sex shaped the internet' (Perdue, 2004).

To the very least porn was instrumental in the development of CD-ROM software, financial verification software for online payments, digital watermarking, computer-based video conferencing, video streaming, e-commerce payment systems, the double opt-in that requires e-mail confirmation, webcam hardware and software and many more (Perdue, 2004, p.260-89; Rogers 2002). Considering the list of innovations, it is hard to disagree that porn created the internet as we currently know it. The best example can be seen where porn has been the scapegoat as well as the guinea pig for researching business models. Guinea pig because business models are tested on these websites, and scapegoat because they help in maintaining the finances of the internet companies who can use the money for developing markets in less defamed areas. An example of the same can be found in e-commerce matrix, where porn can be used for testing technologies as well as for making money for the company (Coppersmith, 1998, p.112-113). Among other innovations of porn, companies are pay per click-through programmers, and conversion based performance systems (where payments are made only for click-throughs that result in a purchase) (Perdue, 2004, p.260-70). The anonymity that the Internet and these new devices provide to porn consumers and producers, professional and nonprofessional is yet another factor that fosters the growth of pornography via the use of new communication. In fact, porn can be easily produced even in one's household, without raising the neighbor's attention, provided one has the basic required instruments, i.e. internet and a smart-phone or a computer (Coopersmith, 1998).

The marriage of new communication technology and pornography continues to evolve, with no end in sight. And the latest plot in this long romance of technology and pornography is the arrival of virtual reality. It has a potential to open a whole new immersive experience for the user facilitated by 360 degrees 3D graphics and sensors which replicate the taste, touch and smell, thus trying to provide a real-world experience (Wood, 2017).

Thus the development of new communication technologies has been intimately linked with the demand for sexually explicit material. This has naturally caused a deep sense of concern to the culturally conscious lot who are worried about the variety of sexual expression in the time of rapid societal and technological change.

Online Porn and Media Moral Panic

There is a widespread concern in the society regarding simultaneously protect our kids and free speech when it comes to online porn. Any technology is neutral in itself, which can be used either in constructive or destructive or in both ways. Whenever a new technology rises to dominance a concern regarding its misuse and negative effects also comes into limelight preceded and followed by various social scientific studies about its impact. This moral panic results from a sudden instance of public distress over a presumed threat to social order. Every technology comes with a promise to disrupt a prevailing social structure. How much these concerns for morality are real or imaginative are subject to rigorous scientific research. But at the very least these moral panics are tied to dissident sexualities such as queer or gay sex which undermining the moral authority of heteronormativity i.e. sex should only have happened between two opposite genders (Sullivan & Mckee, 2015). And this threat is created by none other than those in power in order to further exploit this class of individuals and prevent those from becoming a part of the mainstream who fail to follow the norms (Herdt, 2009). Well, this is not new, public concern over intricate and complex bonds between pornography and technology are only the latest

in a long line of media moral panics.

Earlier in the eighteenth century or before the pornography was available mostly to the wealthiest. Access to the porn was quite a privilege at that time. But later with the growth of the printing press, pornography became more accessible to the common people through books, magazine etc. Case by case surveillance of books was not possible. As books about sexual subjects began to circulate, concerns emerged about their effects on readers (Kendrick, 1996). The Obscene publications act was the first attempt to regulate the proliferation of print pornography in England. Pornography became more democratized with the evolution of communication technologies. Democratization here refers to the availability of an opportunity to produce, distribute or access porn with a reasonable degree of privacy. And the cocktail of mobile and internet has put the wings on porn proliferation. Where anybody with a Smartphone can shoot, upload and watch porn videos where internet network is available.

Contemporary fears about the internet and mobile porn are nothing new and remain bound to hegemonic orders of social control and privilege (Sullivan & Mckee, 2015)

Concern about the possibly damaging effect of internet pornography has fallen into four broad categories:

- Young people are using internet porn for sex education thus learning rough or kinky sex, anal sex or casual sex (Zillmann, 2000). Yes, there exists a relationship between these two but it tells nothing about causality (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009).
- Porn on the internet is addictive (Jhonson, 2010).
- The internet has facilitated the production and distribution of child abuse materials (Endrass et al., 2009).
- Internet porn is more violent than previous forms (Dines, 2010).

In the present time, the genre base and type of pornography available is much wider than what was in the past. The internet has massively lowered the cost of entry into pornography and so now it takes only one person to have a particular sexual interest for that to be available on the Internet. However, it would be contentious to make the historical claim that porn in the previous decades was much cleaner, more innocent and lighthearted than it is today.

The regulation of the internet is the biggest challenge in front of lawmakers not just in the context of pornography but in other areas too. To ban the porn websites is next to impossible thanks to the borderless regimen and proxy servers available at different places at the same time. The wide range of porn material is spread across an equally wide range of sites and networks. Unlike adult stores in the physical world, the online world is hardly managed by local laws. A local council in the physical world can make various laws regulating adult movie store such as minimum age of buyer, distance from school etc; but there is no equivalent online, where every site is potentially only one click away from every other site.

Role of Big Porn Data

The internet is simultaneously the most private yet public medium of sharing and accessing the information. Private in a sense that, you need not to go to any physical store to purchase any pornographic video and hide yourself and your stuff from the people around you. You can access porn in the secret corner of your room without giving anybody a clue about it yet it is the most public because somebody may it be a government or an internet service provider or a big company is registering your every click and activity in their big data bank. The possibility exists that every website you

visit, every picture you view, and every keystroke you make can be monitored and recorded.

Porn is a medium for expressing our most inherent fantasies, which on one hand, we would not like to share with anyone and on the other hand this online viewing of pornography gives researchers a great opportunity in the form of big data for understanding the gap between what is available on the internet and what people actually wish to find (Sullivan & Mckee, 2015). There is a big difference between what is available and what consumers look at as far as the availability of pornography on the internet is concerned. Every second 28,258 users are watching pornography online (Webroot, 2018). A large proportion of items are covered by a very small number of almost universal categories, while a long tail of more specific categories still gathers a large variety of content (Mazieres et al, 2014). The long tail refers to general phenomenon that while there may be a huge number of objects on the internet, only a very small number of them are popular, while the vast majority –‘the long tail’- get little or no traffic at all i.e. ‘the top 5% of the most popular tags covers 90% of videos (Sullivan & Mckee, 2015; Mazieres et al, 2014). Interestingly there is localism in the global porn viewing culture, which means for most countries, the search for their own nation pornography tops the list (Sullivan & Mckee, 2015). One fascinating trend that Big Data reveals is that more conservative and religious states in the USA tend to consume more online pornography than more progressive areas (Edelman, 2009). ‘Rape’ is the 36th most popular pornographic search item on the internet and constitute around 0.48% of all searches (Ogas & Goddam, 2011). Big Data analysis has also shown that child abuse materials are far away from mainstream internet stuff i.e. just 0.2 % of all queries (Latapy, 2013). Thus Big Data gathered from the Internet can make critical analysis and even political intervention better grounded in evidence than moral panic. Well, it is not that there are no drawbacks of online pornography, women objectification, sexism, racism, porn addiction, unwanted exposure to porn through pop-ups etc all forms of abuse are indeed there but instead of condemning all representations depicted in pornography, a more rational approach should be used in dealing with it.

CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt over the proliferation of pornography with the advancement of technology. Technology has made the democratization of pornography but it would be no exaggeration to say that to cater to the needs of porn audience, technology industry also pushed itself to greater innovation. The internet is rapidly changing the nature of production, distribution, and consumption of pornography with the help of smartphones. Smartphones are giving to the porn world mobility of new level. New communication technologies are changing the content of porn. The kind of people who are represented and the kind of sex they can have varies greatly. Pornographic industry is no more just selling products but is shifting to mediate sex as a service. Interactive sex and live sex are the latest features which are growing popular. Not only this technology is also giving voice to the people who were until now marginalized, as far as their sexuality was concerned.

Another aspect touched is that now more and more queers, transgender, homosexuals are creating their own porn videos, developing porn websites, converting porn websites into a social networking portal where they share, discuss, and raise voice openly in favor of their sexuality. In short, the amalgamation of pornography and technology is giving political voice to this community, thus revealing disquiet among scholars and activists alike for how pornography has been defined and debated till now. Instead of rejecting pornography outrightly a balanced approach is needed to deal with it. Discussion about the regulation of pornography is the need of the hour, but it should include all the actors associated with it in one form or another.

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